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Mr. A.R. Cordson

Tom Fuller

Becky Pruitt

INTERVIEWED: Mr. A.R. Cordson, of Savannah. Mr. Cordson is eighty three years old.

INTERVIEWERS: Tom Fuller and Becky Pruitt

Q: You said that you were born in Macon, Georgia?

A: That is exactly right.

Q: And when did you come to Savannah?

A: Oh, I have been in Savannah since I think about 1398. I was born in 1890, so its easy for me to step mine down in tens. At the turn of the century in 1900, I was ten years old.

Q: Did you come to Savannah with your family?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: Why did your family come to Savannah?

A: Why? My father, well, in all those days, ya know, cotton was king, and my father was in the compress business. They shifted him about. Compresses were all over the south. Savannah was the port just like it is today. Of course, everyone knows the idea of pressing bales of cotton was so you could get more in the ship. Baling it at the gin just made it a big bulk and he was superintendant of the Atlantic Press. It just depended where they were pushed at the time. They had compresses in Macon, Savannah, New Orleans, all over the south and where they used to have a half a dozen here in Savannah, I don't think we have any today. Cotton was king, but its no longer king, I think the pine tree is.

Q: As a child, were you excited about moving to Savannah?

A: Yes, I liked Savannah very much more than Macon.

Q: Why was that?

A: Well, its not too hard to answer that question. Up in Macon I just seemed to run with one outfit of playmates, when we came to Savannah, we moved in a nice location and hell, there were some Irish boys, some Jew boys, and we all had a few scraps, but we got along remarkably well. And just generally speaking, I liked Savannah. I grew up here. I didn't know what I wanted to do, so a relative of mine said I'll put him to work. It was my long desire to go

to technical school, Georgia Tech. but the way it turned out we weren't fortunate enough for me to go. I had to stay and work. It was neccessary.

Q: Was this to help your family?

A: Well, yes, that would be correct.

Q: When did you start to work? How old were you?

A: Fourteen years old.

Q: What did you do?

A: I was fourteen and I think that schools were a bit different then. The elementary grades went up to seventh. Then the high had three grades and if you past them you could go to any college you wanted to, Yale, Harvard, Princeton or Georgia Tech for that matter. But I took a course from the International Correspondence Schools and got to be a draftsman, but didn't work very regular at that.

Q: You got a job as a draftsman in Savannah?

A: Yes I never stayed steady at that, but I did considerable drafting with both firms that I was with. I was making what is ordinarily called take-offs, quantities, you know? We had to itemize everything. Of course, I don't think they do that anymore. Not if they are building a house or apartment, its just so much square feet. How many square feet are init. But I used to have to analyze it, take it all off so many cubic feet, yards of excavation, the back fill, the temporary structures, cubic yards of construction concrete and itemize the pourring the foundation and fixing the lumber.

Q: How much did it cost to build a house back then?

A: Well, I built one before World War I. I was drafted while we were building quite a house. I was scattered around. This was with Oliff Otto and I didn't build any houses, not while I was with Artley and Co. for thirty years, and I don't recall building any houses. I built two bungalows over in Carolina but that was on Marshall Field's estate and they were just bungalows for the dog trainers to stay in. They had a big hunting reserve over there, you know, and they built great areas for big barns and for thirty horses and a big residence for Marshall Field down near the

coast. We could see the lights on Parris Island where they train the Marines, and thats where I built it. Oh, not, now, but I used to know the Morning News people. I built the Morning News Building. The one facing Bay Street in 1925. And I knew everyone connected with the Morning News. I also built the Sears Roebuck Building on Bull and Henry, that something else today. They discarded it, you know?

Q: Was there a big construction boom in Savannah? Anytime a lot of money came into Savannah?

A: You mean, a boom? We had two or three tough times, in the thirties we had a depression and quite a few knew what that Depression meant. It meant you had to watch every penny. But I don't remember any, you know the Wall Street Crash of the thiretiesf Between the two world wars, in the twenties was the "Roaring Twenties". There was a lot of rich northernors bought all these ante Bellum plantations from Wilmington, Delaware to all the way down the coast, that is except in Florida, it wasn't developed yet. But especially along the Carolina coast. And there are some wonderful places up there. Course you can't see them from the road.

Q: Did any of these people come to Savannah during the Twenties?

A: No, there's a few of them over in Blufton. And I don't remember any in Hilton Head. They tell me now its built up. I don't know. But Savannah had done remarkably well in old Savannah. But Savannah always was the most beautiful city to me. Cause you get on Bay Street and go south on Bull around all those squares, the engineer who came over with Oglethorpe sure knew his banannas. When they first planned Savannah it was the easiest city in the world to get around. No now. Cause after Oglethorpe man's quit planning everyone else quit and after you get out old Savannah, you find a section here and a section there. And they just developed where the cows walked.

Q: Is that what it seemed like when you were in the construction business?

A: Thats right.
Q: Where was the outskirts of town? The suburbs?

A: The outskirts? Well, when I first started to work? I don't know. Do you know where the old Benedictine is on Bull

and 34th Street? Well, I was fourteen with the firm and helped them dig the trench for the building. That the Benedictine College building. It was in existence. It was a wooden building over on Habersham Street. I don't think there was anything out here.

Q: Were there any roads out here? Was it farm country?

A: Out here? I remember all along this area the coloredpeople had sugar cane patches. There was nothing out here.

Q: Did they live out here?

A: The colored peopl were scattered about but there was no farms like or anythng. Just paths. They had world famous automobile races out here which you probable heard about. That was in 1909-1911 but after that none at all. Do you know where Victory Drive is? Well, that was a gravel path. There was nothing south of Victory Drive. The main thing south was a row of wooden buildings that ran from Bull Street to Habersham. It was the hospital for the sick and woulnded of the Spanish-American War. And of course at the time of the auto races the government had abandoned them because the war over. But I just remembered that. There was nohing this side. I wouldn't know for sure where the city limits were. All of the area of Ardesly Park and the Granger Track came later. Do you know where Savannah High School is? Well, after they had the races they had decided to build a hotel for all the tourists. And thats where it was started. The foundation was started and then they ran out of money. Then when time came to build a new high school they put it there. It was called the Granger Track. During the Twenties, I put up quite a few houses out there. In those days houses were built good. At th t time they'd cost $25,000. But the same house today would stick you for about $75-$40, 000. I know one house that I built over here on Abercorn and 44th Street and it cost $70,000 in World War I. Today it would cost $200,000! Built out of brick. Everyth ng built today is prefabricated.

Q: People say now a days that houses are not as well built as they were prior to World War II. Why is this?

A: I was on l lotta camp work during the war. They started from scratch in many places. Roads, sewers, telephones we had sub-contractors. When it started out it was called semi-permanent works but some of those buildings could be lasting today, but those things they're building today, especially those apartments, I would call them semi-permanent

works. In no circumstances would I call it permanent. They are careless. If a fire started at one end of the attic, it would go right on through. Its like a suction tube. Some of them might be ok. Most of them are built out of ply wood and they haven't made a ply wood yet that is permenent. A great deal of it is due to sloppy workmanship.

Do you think that people built houses better back then because because they took more pride in them?

A: Oh, yes in the positive. If you had more sinspectiona nd we built houses back then we knew who we ware gohna build them for when we started out, while here today they don't know who is gonna live in it. They don't give a damn. This is the day of the fast buck. Get it up and sell it. I don't remember building a house that I didn't know who was gonna live in it. But, just like I told you, most the companies I worked for built industrial buildings, like Certain Teed up the river. And the railroad shops. But way back then they built two story houses and they had beautiful stairways and I may be wrong, but if you built a house now and you want a stairway you got to go outa Savannah, probably to Hickory, N.C. to the furniture factory. I don't think you can find anyone here today who can build a stairway. Maybe you could, but I would call them steps.

Q: Did you have a lot of specialized craftsmen working for you back then?

A: Oh, in those days we had just exactly that. We had stairway builders, and thats all they did, and there was another with that. They came down with curved handrails, spirals called monkey tails, I don't think anyone can do it today. Hickory, N. C. can do it. Also, today you build for investment and inspection is very bad. Just set the damn thing up.

Q: Were there any other specialized crafts? How about wrought iron?

A: Wrought iron? Yes. The Savannah Wrought Iron and Wire Work used to do beautiful work. I'm talking about the a days when Wilson and Dabney, thats the man whodid the work. They passed away some years ago. Lot of the people in Charleston used to get them to do some of the work like the old sword gates, different ornamental works. They also had plasterers tht I don't think exist exist any more. They did beautiful walls. Then they had this jelly stuff tht they would make

freizes that go around the cieling. They could put a chain of roses around there. Everything now is just straight lines. Also we had painters that did beautiful work. They used good white lead. And they mixed their own paint colors. These ladies that want a certain color and can't find it, would just go to them. Painters, plasters, and another thing, if you notice that has almost disappeared is brick workers, now you say, why I see brick work but its all straight lines, miles and miles of it. You see beautiful arches and they tear them down . They demolished the old YMCA building and that had beautiful arches. Those masons hand cut the bricks for those arches. There's a building , St Joseph's Hospital, that is a nice looking building, but its all straight lines. They take some pre-cast reinforced concrete and set that up and make a panel by putting the bricks into it. That's very beautiful but you don't see any arches or ornamental brickwork. Now, there's two reasons for that. If you go pay a brick layer to do fancy work, what you gonna pay him? Seven dollars an hour? Probably. Somebody gonna have to have a barrell of money to do that. Today they can sit in a chair and they have a rig for him and he mixes it stick right on the back and he's got holes for hooks at the top. Slide it around and when it sets there these trucks come into and take it out to the job site and a crane picks it up to the 25th floor and puts it in place. They've really made some progress. They go so fast. Then the buildings fall in, like in Washington. They're going too fast.

Q: We read your newspaper article and we saw that you talked about the "skating craze" and we were wondering what this was?

A: Yes, roller skating. That's , I can remember the 1905, would be just about the year, it lasted for awhile. It was a big skating craze. We had cement walks that we skated all around the park extension. It got so strong that someone, I don't remember who, built a skating rink. It had a fine, maple floor in it. They had hockey teams thaere that would bat the hell out of each other just like them skating on ice now. They used to play a team from Macon, my old home town. They used to beat the hell out of the Savannah Team. They had a trick. They would skate round and then they would stand on the tips on their toes and run. I think the rules were the same as today. It was as dangerous and as blood spilled as today. Some of those big boys on skates were dangerous. For years the craze want strong for three or four years.

Q: Did people go to the skating things like they do foorball today?

A: Oh, yes, along about the turn of the century Savannah had a wonderful football team. They used to figuire out how in proportion Savannah used to have great crowds. They played on the Bolton Street field. Used to have wonderful games. But at the times I'm speaking of they had what they called the Ivy League schools like Harvard, Yale Princeton, Penn State and Columbia. Yale had the football team. Savannah was a big Yale town. I had a friend in Conneticut whose father, Coy, was the famous Yale player. He was captain in 1909.

Q: When you were you were young, early twenties, what kind of social things did you do?

A: Well, tht can be easily answered. We used to have clubs. In 1908, I was six years in the Oglethorpe Light Infantry, first Georgia Regiment. And that was six companies. The armory was where the Warrne Candler Hospital is today. We started a social club in our company. And the Volunteer Guards had four companies. Their building is still there, right across from Solomon's Drugs. It has beautiful brick-work. Also there was the Chatham Artillery. All of them had social clubs. You ever heard of Chatham Artillary Punch? It was a secret for years. If you take three drinks, they carry you out on a stretcher. The social life was all based on the military organizations, the rank and file never had no automobiles, you had to have it high in the bank to won an automobile. The society people were the Savannah Volunteer Guards. The regiment had six companies; the Savannah Gadets, Oglethorpe Light Infantry, Irish Green, Republican Blues, German Vounteers, and the Emmett Rifles. Most every element is in there. All had their own club. On Washington's birthday, they'd have a big sham battle out here somewhere and on Lee's birthday you'd see the parade, with the tourist all watching. It was the finest military show The Georgia Volunteers had fancy uniforms and the First Georgia Regiment had regulation uniforms. They would take pride in drilling, so you would see a military company march like it should. They had nice horses. The Chatham Artillary had the artillary and they had the naval reserves. Savannah was a real military town. There was your social life. It was not all military, but to put it shortly, if you wasn't in the military, you weren't in the social life of Savannah.

Q: Who had autos? Just the rich people?

A: Yes, as far as Savannah was concerned, you would have to be classified as a rich man to won a car. It was a little later on beofre the poor man got the Ford. Fords came out very soon aroun the turn of the century. But they didn't spread out. I remamber that Teddeman and Bacon had autos,

but they didn't have Fords. They had a Marman or a Pierce-Arrow and all those were fine automobiles. Those were the the rich man's car. Later the "tin Lizzie" the model T, was the poor man's car.

Q: How did everyone else get around?

A: Well, when I firstarted to work for my father he had a horse and buggy. They had a wonderful transportation system. You had your street cars and Savannah had what was called the N-W Belt, but as far as Savannah proper, they'd give you transfers. They had the Habersham Line, the Thunderbolt line, the Isle of Hope line. When the Ford agent , L.C. Lewis's father was the agent, that was when you could buy a Ford on the installment plan. That's when he boomed out. C.A. Bryson was the Parkard dealer. That was the rich man's car in 1909. And when Ford began to spread out, J.C. Lewis was working for Bryson. The Ford dealer came through and he wanted Bryson to take over a dealership and they tell me Mr. Bryson said , "why me sell those used sardine cans?" Practically insulted the man. The man went on through and came back through and talked to J.C.Lewis and go t him to to take the Ford agency and when he did he was a millionaire and Bryson went broke. See, where Bryson sold maybe one Parkard to a rich man, Lewis sold twenty-five Fords to a not so rich m n. You'd buy a Ford back in those days for say, six or seven hundred dollars. Cost you that many thousands now adays.

Q: I also noticed in your letters that you said something about toll roads?

A: Yes, thats right. You had to pay to go on them.

Q: Why was this?

A: I remember riding bycycles w en they had the toll roads up here on Bull and Victory Drive. And a other one over on Wheaton Street. Well, I was a boy then and the road as paved with oyster shells. And they would grad it with a mule and then the rest was donewith h nd labor. Well, that costs something. We boys would go bycycl riding and we would have to pay a nickle. I don't remember what horse and buggies had to pay. I guess they had to pay a quarter. it was to help pay for the road. Wheaton STreet was called Skidaway and it was paved. Now y u woul d be surprized at how good they were. A little dusty in dry weather, but good. I remember during World War I working on Ossabaw Island down there, they used to build these tabby huts nd the whole damn wall was built out of them. They crushed

the shell. Then they had a place where they burned some of the shell and they got crisp and they mixed them with water and that was the lime and have a form made out of boards and pour the lime in it.

Q: If you didn't want to use the toll road could you still get to these places?

A: Well, a lot of the places were built on the water. You could go by boat to a lot of these places. They didn't have no bridges. I know when I started to work, you worked ten hours a day and then in a few years, I'll answer your question directly, you worked tnn hours on Saturday too. Those stores on Broughton stayed open til midnight and then a few years came into pass and unions came and you got a nine hour day. I remember the year and the outfit I was with was building St. Paul's Church on the corner of Abercorn and the mechanics struck all over town for the eight hour day and a half day on Saturday. And then they cut out saturday.

Q: You mentioned in your article about the picnics out to Warsaw Island? Was this a common occurrence?

A: I remember that was when St. John's Church on Bull Street had the boys choir. It was some choir. I had a cousin in it and they were the ones who had the picnics. It was on an old flat bottomed boat. It was quite a boat. A stern wheeler. And it was quite difficult to get through the out. You could get through on half tide and high tide and Warsaw was quite a place. The choir boys always put the picnic on Warsaw. It was a train that ran toTybee by the way.

Q: Could other people go on these picnics?

A: Yes, others could go. I remember distinctly that they didn't have much of a pavillion or bathhouse but they had a nice beach. But I think someone bought it and it became private. But at the time I am talking about its about1900. Theres where the choir boys existed, but other boys could get the boat. You talk about social life, this was the social life. And I think that going to Warsaw was very interesting. Ossabaw was a great island too. Tybee was nothing compared to Ossabaw and Warsaw.

Q: I wanted to ask you here, kind of in closing, if you ever thought about moving somewhere else? Did you ever have an opportunity to or have you always been satisfied here?

A: Theres a brief answer; I never thought about leaving Savannah. It was always good. I got along without much misfortune.

Just some illness and any common sense will tell you that no matter where you are you can get that. No, I never thought seriously about leaving. I've worked out of S vannah a lot. I worked the Jacksonville Naval Station just previous to the last world war and while I was with the Artly Espey company we put up a bit of the Valdosta base, Moody Air Force Base. We moved some cows in the field. And in Charleston and along the coast. But I'll tell you, in the twnetios, when the rich yankees came down and bought up those places there were some beautiful places up there, but to answer your question, no I never thought about leaving. I made several trips to Brooklyn, New York cause my mothers people are all up there, but talk about going up there today, no not unless, I was an expert rifleman and unless you let me carry my gun with me I'm not going.